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A NEW CONTRIBUTION TO ECONOMIC HISTORY.¹

AN eminent historian in the English Cambridge once penned, in the course of an effective protest against the *belles-lettistic* treatment of his subject, a solemn warning about interesting books. "It is not generally by fascinating books that the scientific knowledge of the world is advanced."² But the new professor at Harvard has succeeded in showing that it is possible to make the results of thorough and careful study "fascinating." While most discriminating in the use of evidence, he has yet the knack of introducing concrete instances and illustrating his subject by useful analogies; he has been able to carry his readers along wonderfully, and to give a vivid interest to the discussion of difficult technicalities. Dullness is not a necessary concomitant of learning. The condemnation of the *belles-lettres* writers of history lay in the fact that they were not careful to show the justification for each step in the development of the story. A history which merely states the writer's opinions in regard to the past may be true or false; but whether true or not, it is always worthless to the student, if he has no means of examining the data on which it rests, and correcting or confirming the conclusions it contains. A work like the present, which puts in clear light the results of genuine research, is a real addition to scientific knowledge, not only because it gives an exposition of conclusions actually established, but because it affords a firm basis for pushing investigation farther.

Some portions of this volume have already seen the light, but Professor Ashley was well advised in re-issuing them now, with the valuable fresh matter which he has been able to add, instead of waiting to complete his work on all sides. The exigencies of limited time and changes of place have prevented him from attempting to picture the industrial and social conditions of each successive age in order, or from dealing systematically with the relations and interconnections between economic and political life. The subject of the foreign trade of the country is deliberately omitted; Columbus

¹ An Introduction to English Economic History and Theory. By W. J. Ashley. Vol. I, Part II (in the American edition, Vol. II): The End of the Middle Ages. London, Longmans, Green & Co.; New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893.—xi, 501 pp.

² Prof. Seeley, in *Macmillan's Magazine*, XIV, 295.

and Cabot, with the age of discovery, are ignored ; governmental action, whether in directing lines of policy or imposing taxes, is scarcely alluded to. Since such important groups of facts are passed by, it might be said that the volume is not exactly a history, but rather a collection of historical essays. But this phrase is used advisedly, to indicate the range and scope of the work, not its quality. The word essay has been unduly degraded in recent years ; but the term which has been chosen to designate their work by Petty and Malthus and Vinogradoff will always have honorable associations for students of economic history.

Professor Ashley has separated out the most important sides of industrial life, and followed out with great clearness their development during three centuries. Drawbacks are to be found in connection with any order of treatment, and Professor Ashley has no immunity from the common lot. Three hundred years is a long time ; there is room for a great deal of change, and in reading about such a long period as a whole, it is not always easy to fix with precision what special date is intended. Professor Ashley has recognized this source of confusion (page 98), but he has not sufficiently guarded against it. For instance we read :

In earlier centuries the merchant gild had stood above all the craft gilds, and had exercised or claimed jurisdiction over them. But now, owing to a concurrence of forces, the merchants of the town had come to be themselves grouped in associations, which stood not above, but alongside of, the purely artisan bodies. [Page 24.]

But what case can be specified of a merchant gild claiming "jurisdiction" over craft gilds in centuries earlier than the fourteenth? It obviously is not true of London ; of what English town is it true? What epoch in these three centuries is denoted by the word "now"? How much gradual change and of what varied sorts is glazed over by the phrase "a concurrence of forces"!

To take another case, it is rather bewildering to read that the economic activity of the early middle ages was an almost exclusively agricultural one. . . . Then there slowly arose a merchant class ; at first, it would seem, merely to meet the needs of the wealthy and more luxurious, and then to transport from place to place a local superfluity of such raw produce as corn or wool. But with the appearance of craft gilds we see, for the first time, a body of men with whom manufacture was not a bye-employment. [Page 99.]

As we find weavers' gilds in the twelfth century, how far back are we to look for the slow growth of the merchant class? Indeed

what proof is there that there ever was in any English town during the early middle ages such a merchant class, as distinct from craftsmen or shipmen who traded? From the language he uses about this supposed merchant class (page 209) and the earlier craft gilds, it would almost seem that Professor Ashley has not taken sufficient account of the researches of Dr. Gross. But this point, as well as his persistent denial of an important artisan immigration from the continent in Norman times, belongs more properly to the subject of his earlier volume, and need not be discussed in any detail here.

The want of precision, of which complaint has been made, gives rise to a difficulty of another kind. Three hundred years allows time for a town to rise and flourish and decay; and when the period is taken as a whole, there is danger of not sufficiently accentuating the fluctuations which occurred within it. Professor Ashley recognizes the decay of municipalities, as authorities for directing and regulating industrial life, but he declines to believe in the general decay of their material prosperity in early Tudor times (page 50). This is the more surprising as he himself admits elsewhere that the older towns were in economic difficulties from the competition of the new domestic manufactures (page 235). Such decay is probable enough; and there was at least a widely spread opinion in Tudor times that towns were decaying. It seems to be a gratuitous exercise of ingenuity to try and explain away a part of the evidence on the subject.

But to turn to more important matters. On one interesting topic, to which I have already alluded elsewhere,¹ Professor Ashley has collected an immense amount of interesting information. The survivals of communal economic life are treated in considerable detail; several instances of the continuance of town bargaining are adduced,² and the whole account of the town granaries³ is fresh and full of interest.

Professor Ashley has devoted but a small amount of space to rural life; but his map of the enclosures in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is a painstaking attempt to make a first approximation to the solution of a difficult problem. No one can hope yet awhile to say the last word on any such point in economic history; but he has done well to put on record in this convenient form the results he has reached from the sources available to him; it will be for himself and others to fill up details and to render the whole more

¹ *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, V, 343.

² Page 39.

³ Page 34.

accurate. The discrimination he has exercised becomes apparent in the hesitation he expresses about placing Northamptonshire among the enclosed counties, despite the explicit evidence of W. S. in the well-known *Dialogue*. This hesitation is fully justified; since it appears from Miss Lamond's edition¹ that Devonshire, not Northamptonshire, is the right reading in the *Dialogue*. It is also shown by a paper in the British Museum that Northamptonshire was regarded as a typical unenclosed county in 1607.² The soundness of Professor Ashley's judgment is thus confirmed by independent evidence. On the other hand, it may be doubted whether the assumption, that land which was open field in the eighteenth century had never been enclosed, is justified. It does not seem clear, because Arthur Young found some district in common fields, that these had never been enclosed and thrown back again into the old condition. Were none of the riots against enclosure successful, not even those of 1549? The case of Warwickshire seems to be in point; the south-east of the county was unenclosed in the time of Leland; it is equally certain that the enclosing of this very district had been proceeding rapidly in 1459. John Ross complains of the new dangers on the road between Warwick and London, and specifies many villages in this part of the shire which had suffered severely by the progress of sheep-farming, and from which the villains had been evicted.³ In connection with this it is also noticeable that Professor Ashley seems to regard 1470 as the beginning of the movement (page 286); but John Ross certainly gives the impression that it had been going on for some time even in his day. The earliest case of riot in connection with Warwickshire enclosures that I have noticed was in 1374, when "the commons of Coventry rose, and cast loaves at the mayor's head, and cast open that which the mayor had enclosed."⁴ This is not precisely relevant, perhaps, as it does not appear to have been a case of the eviction of villains. But it at least serves to show that sporadic enclosure was found profitable a century before the time when, according to Professor Ashley, the movement became general and rapid.

¹ A Discourse of the Commonweal of thys Realme of England, first printed in 1581, and commonly attributed to W. S.; edited from the MSS. by E. Lamond (Cambridge, 1893), p. 49, l. 13.

² Tit. F. IV, f. 319.

³ Historia Regum Angliae, p. 122.

⁴ Wanley's Collections. British Museum. Harl. MSS., 6388.

There is also some difficulty about the date he fixes for the close of the period of rapid enclosures; he puts it at 1530. But surely the dissolution of the monasteries and the influence of the new nobility tended to accelerate rather than to check the progress of enclosure. The whole story of John Hales and the commission of 1548 seems to show that the work of enclosure, accompanied by depopulation, was going forward rapidly; indeed Professor Ashley's own language lends some confirmation to this view. "The transference of the monastery lands to private owners increased very largely the area troubled by these agrarian changes." Had the church lands remained in ecclesiastical hands, "the transition would probably have been more gradual and less ruthless" (page 317). But if this is so, why is the time of rapid change placed so early? Was it really over before this ruthless and widespread transition began? Here as elsewhere the treatment of the same topic in different parts of the volume does not seem to be quite self-consistent.

The most important subject in regard to which Professor Ashley has not only supplemented but corrected the work of other writers (including myself) is the confiscation of gild property under Edward VI. He shows that the act of Parliament was much more discriminating than is usually stated, and that its scope was carefully confined to the property devoted, either temporarily or permanently, to religious objects; though he does not examine the cases of the "concealed lands" of the Grocers and other London companies,¹ he shows that in some other instances an honest attempt was made to carry out the measure without going beyond the limits to which it was confined. Whatever the actual results may have been, it is no longer possible to describe the enactment as a sweeping measure of confiscation.

But there is another problem of which the solution is not so plain. Professor Ashley seems to suppose that if their property was not illegally confiscated, the authority of the gilds and companies was also preserved. This is the question which seems to me of primary importance; did these gilds and companies survive as recognized authorities, with coercive powers for the regulation of industry? That similar authority was subsequently called into being by parliamentary or royal action is obvious. But is there any proof that the coercive authority of the old companies continued to be exercised after the Combination Act of Edward VI? Even in a city like York, where the action of the companies seems to be unbroken, there is evidence to show that though apparently continuous, it had assumed

¹ Strypes, Stow's Annals, book v, p. 233.

an entirely new character in 1519, and that the companies merely played the part of informers, while the authority was directly exercised by the mayor.¹ The really important question is not as to the continued existence of certain bodies as holders of property or as amateur dramatic clubs,—for this is clear enough,—but as to their continuance as industrial authorities. Professor Ashley fails to pay sufficient attention to the very important distinction between the different sources from which the authority to exercise regular control over industry was derived. Had he examined it, he could hardly have referred to Adam Smith in the way he does: the corporations which the *Wealth of Nations* condemns were companies like the Sheffield Cutlers, who exercised powers conferred by Parliament; Adam Smith was inclined to take a more favorable view of the corporations in Scotland,² which were municipal in character, and therefore were true, though imperfect, analogues of pre-Reformation craft gilds in England.

In an earlier chapter, indeed, it appears to me that Professor Ashley has strained the analogy between the industrial institutions in English and in Scotch towns (page 72). The “trades” of the latter were much more closely allied to continental than to English usage, at any rate after the Scottish war of independence. But his treatment of the condition of the poor is an excellent example of the successful use of the comparative method; this is far less likely to mislead when it is used to fill out a description, than when appeal is made to it to supply an explanation. The condition of the poor in England before the Reformation period has hitherto been very obscure, and the side lights which are thrown upon it from the researches of continental historians are of very great value. As ecclesiastical institutions and charity were similar in all parts of Latin Christendom, there is every probability that the same usages would be adopted in dealing with similar social problems; and this view is confirmed by the isolated information drawn from English sources. The chapter is quite admirable.

The last chapter also, on “The Canonist Doctrine,” is deserving of the highest praise. Those who recognize that thought and sen-

¹ It is agreed that the searchers of no occupation within this city, suburbs and liberties of the same shall have the correction and punishment of the defaults done and commenced concerning all the said occupations or any of them, but that the same defaults hereafter shall be punished and redressed only by the mayor for the time being and his brethren, and half of the forfeiture of the said defaults shall remain to the weal of the said city, and the other half to such occupation as the case shall require.—Drake, *Eboracum*, p. 215.

² *Wealth of Nations*, Nicholson's edition, p. 51.

timent are the most powerful of all economic forces, will not regard the space allotted to this discussion disproportionate, even though the direct consequences of the changes of opinion were not immediately apparent. Professor Ashley's account of the matter is clear and sympathetic ; it will surely be less possible for modern theorists of reputation to brush aside with ignorant contempt the distinctions drawn in the middle ages.¹ Even those who have devoted some little attention to the subject will find much that is fresh and interesting in Professor Ashley's chapter, especially in his account of Eck, Major and the Romanist divines of the sixteenth century.

These two chapters are among the best in a book that is excellent, though somewhat unmethodical, throughout ; and there are passages which show that Professor Ashley has a clear view of the importance of history, and its relation to other branches of economic study ; there is an underlying system. We hear nothing of universal "laws," but only of useful generalisations of more or less importance (page 262). Again in regard to the statement that capital is an historical category, we read these excellent remarks :

What is true of "capital" (not as economists have understood it, but as the world uses the term) is equally true of the great jural conceptions of "property," "inheritance" and the like. These are not logical abstractions, but the varying expressions in thought of varying usages in social life. There is no abstract right of property, but there have been at various times varying rights of property; and similarly, there is no eternal stamp upon things which makes them capital, but merely varying means attached to the possession of wealth for the acquisition of further wealth. [Page 434.]

The standpoint from which he writes is definite, and his mode of investigation is fruitful ; in the freer atmosphere of the New World he can even allow himself the luxury of bestowing good advice on fellow-workers who are forced to engage in controversies on method.² But it is surely permissible to ask why we should not apply to the study of present day phenomena, the same principles of careful observation and limited generalisation that are so instructive for the affairs of bye-gone times? So long as practical influences exclude those who devote themselves to political economy as an empirical science from taking any part in teaching or writing on modern affairs, the controversy about method is likely to continue. If such students are to be forced into silence, they will certainly ask the reason why.

W. CUNNINGHAM.

¹ Böhm-Bawerk, *Capital and Interest*, page 24.

² Preface, page xi ; compare also *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, VII, 123.